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ABSTRACT

A questionnaire surveyed 72 combination classroom (CC) teachers in 28 rural schools of North Carolina to determine their needs. The major conclusions of the study based on teachers' perceptions were: (1) all CC teachers should have an aide and a pay bonus to teach a CC; (2) colleges and school districts have not provided special training on how to teach a CC; (3) the majority of teachers do not prefer to teach CCs; (4) students do as well academically and socially in a CC; (5) younger students do as well academically and socially in a CC as they do in a regular classroom; (6) CC might be harmful to a student if they have a CC year after year; (7) teachers feel strongly about classroom size, preferring small CCs to large regular classes; (8) parents do not like CCs for their children but the students do not seem to mind if they are in one; and (9) teachers who like to teach CCs integrate instruction and mix the grade levels for instruction. A national study is needed to compare student achievement and social growth in CCs and regular classrooms to determine the long term effects of CCs on students. (KS)

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WHAT RURAL COMBINATION CLASSROOM TEACHERS SAY ABOUT TEACHING COMBINATION CLASSES

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What Rural Combination Classroom Teachers Say About Teaching Combination Classes

"When I was told by my principal that I would have a combination classroom (CC) I felt like resigning. I became sick to my stomach and had nightmares for weeks," writes one rural public school teacher. This teacher is not alone. Sixty five percent of the rural teachers who responded to the survey agree with her.

Combination Classrooms are the "back water" of education. Everyone knows there are problems with CCs but no one seems to do anything about it. This survey points out several things that school districts could do to assist teachers who are assigned to teach CCs.

For the past two years a CC conference has been held on the Western Carolina University campus. Entitled "Teaching In Combination Classrooms", the conference attracted approximately 60 teachers per year. The CC teachers who attended expressed the opinion that colleges, school boards, administrators and teachers have not given enough attention to the problems

of CC teachers and their students. Because of the concerns expressed at these conferences a questionnaire was sent to 100 CC teachers in 28 rural schools of North Carolina to find out what their needs were. There were 72 questionnaires returned. The rural CC teachers who returned the questionnaire represented a wide range of teaching experiences. (see Tables I and II)

TABLE I
YEARS OF TEACHING EXPERIENCE

1-10 years experience ------ 27 teachers
11-20 years experience ------ 25 teachers
21-30 years experience ------ 20 teachers

TABLE II
AVERAGE NUMBER OF TIMES TEACHERS TAUGHT A CC

1-10 years experience -------- 3 times
11-20 years experience -------- 6 times
21-30 years experience --------7 times

The results of the questionnaire are given in Table II which is on the next page.

TABLE III
RESULTS OF QUESTIONNAIRE IN PERCENTILES

	Strongly agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. I enjoy teaching a combination classroom (CC).	22%	28%	5%	22%	23%
2. Academically, CC students do as will as the regular classes.	34%	37%	9%	8%	12%
3. Academically, the younger students in a CC do better.	15%	22%	32%	22%	9%
4. It does not harm students to be in CC every year.	12%	15%	23%	24%	26%
5. Socially, CC students do as well as regular classes.	35%	35%	10%	11%	9%
6. Socially, the younger students in a CC do better.	12%	18%	36%	26%	8%
7. There is better social interaction and cooperation in a CC.	15%	23%	11%	29%	22%
8. CC teachers should keep students apart, by grade level, for academic instruction.	15%	39%	21%	12%	11%
9. CC teachers should teach academic content in an integrated way that mixes the grade levels.	25%	33%	21%	15%	6%
10. CC teachers should be given an aide and a pay bonus.	75%	17%	3%	3%	2%
11. Colleges prepare teachers to teach CC.	3%	5%	11%	29%	52%
12. I would prefer 20 students in CC, to 30 in a regular class.	40%	23%	8%	11%	18%
13. Principals/teachers don't appreciate CC teachers enough.	50%	17%	13%	15%	5%
14. CC teachers are given all the materials for both grades.	13%	50%	6%	20%	11%
15. Our school district has a special in-service for CC teachers.	1%	3%	5%	31%	60%

16. How many years have you taught? _TABLE I___

17. How many times have you taught a CC? _TABLE II___

18. I am eager to teach a CC again. Yes_35%___ No _65%____

19. Do the parents of your students like CC ? Yes __45%_ No __55%__

20 Do the majority of your students like to be in CC? Yes _69%__ No _31%__ ....

Sixty five percent of the teachers do not want to teach CC again but 35% said that they enjoy teaching in a CC and are looking forward to having another. This survey points out that there were strong opinions for and against CCs.

Responding to the questions about how well do CC students do academically and socially, it was found that 70% of the CC teachers felt that students do as well in a CC as they do in a regular class.

Only 20% of the teachers said they felt that students did not do as well academically and socially in a CC; 9% of the teachers were undecided on this issue. One might expect that the many CC teachers (65%) who do not like to teach combinations would have based their opinions on the fact that being in a CC was bad for the students; it seems they have based their opinions on something other than academic and social progress of students.

The response to the question about whether it harms students to be placed in a CC every year, it was found that 50% of the teachers feel that it is harmful to students. Twenty seven percent felt it was not harmful and 23% were undecided as to the effects of repeated experiences in a CCs on students. It is

interesting that such a large percent felt it was harmful for students to be in a CC every year and yet they (70%) feel that CCs do not hurt their students' academic and social progress.

A review of the literature did not find any major studies that would tell us if CC students have higher or lower achievement scores than the students in a regular classroom. The respondents to the survey pointed out that the CC teachers feel there is no significant difference between the regular classrooms and the CCs with respect to academic and social progress.

Two local rural school districts were asked to share last years scores. Since they had tested all the 4th grade students last year on the California Achievement Test it was possible to obtain the scores from six combination 3rd and 4th grade classrooms and were able to compare them to the regular 4th grade classes. It was found that the CC students scored an average of 18 percentile points higher than the regular classroom students. Could this be true for the whole state and nation? The central office personnel explained that the difference resulted from the principals' putting more academically talented students into the CCs.

There needs to be a national study making comparisons of student achievement and social growth in CCs and regular classrooms to determine the long term effects of CCs on students. What are the most effective ways to group students for CC? Much research needs to be done in the future.

Responding to the questions about how well the younger students in a CC do academically and socially, it was found that there was no consistent agreement. About 33% said that it is helpful, 33% said they were undecided and 33% said CCs were harmful to the younger students. If the respondents were mixed on academic and social growth of younger students they had clearer opinions on social interaction and cooperation in a CC. Fifty one percent of the teachers said the interaction and cooperation in a CC was not better than the regular classroom, while 38% said it was better.

It is interesting that 55% of the CC teachers who responded feel that parents do not like their students to be in a CC. Is this because they are concerned about the students' social or academic growth? It is even more interesting to note that 69% of these

teachers feel that the students actually like CCs. Why do students but not parents like CCs?

The majority of those surveyed 63% said that they would rather have 20 students in a CC than 30 in a regular class. Twenty-nine percent would rather have 30 students in a regular classroom than a CC and 7% are undecided. Classroom size seems to be a major concern for teachers. They seem to really prefer smaller classes even if they have combined grades.

Fifty four percent of the teachers feel that the students should be kept apart by grade level for academic instruction. Of those responding to the question about integrating academic content and mixing the grade levels for instruction 58% stated that CCs should be integrated and the grade levels mixed. The undecided group was 20% and those who did not want integration of content and mixing of grades was 23%. These two question gave us mixed data because (54%) of the teachers said the CC teacher should keep the students apart by grade level and 58% said they should mix the grades. The feeling is that the question was not understood clearly by the individuals responding to the

questionnaire. From this survey it cannot be said that the students should or should not be mixed for class instruction.

Principals and teachers do not appreciate CC teachers enough, said 67% of the teachers surveyed; there were 23% of the teachers who felt the principal did appreciate them and 10% were undecided.

Often teachers complain that they do not get all of the books and materials they need to teach this additional class. Only 31% indicated that they did not get enough books and materials, while the majority of the teachers 63% said they got all the books and materials needed.

There were three items on which the CC teachers had almost unanimous opinions: 1) universities did not prepare them to teach in a CCs (81%); 2) CC teachers want to be given an aide and a pay bonus (92%); 3) school districts do not have a special in-service training for CC teachers at the beginning of the school year (91%).

Analyzing responses to each question by the number of years of teaching experience provided some interesting findings. The experienced teachers (21-30 years) had the following strong opinions: 1) enjoyed teaching CCs the most; 2) feel that younger

students do better academically and socially in CC; 3) feel CCs should teach the grade levels separately. The younger teachers (1-10 years) had the following strong opinions: 1) there is better cooperation and interaction in a CC; 2) feel that CCs should mix grade levels and integrate content more; 3) feel that principals appreciate them teaching a CC; 4) colleges did not prepare them to teach CC. Teachers with 11-20 years of experience expressed these strong opinions: 1) feel least appreciated by the principal; 2) feel they do not get enough books and materials to teach a CC.

This questionnaire clearly points out several findings. First there needs to be more research in the area of CCs. It is clear that rural CC teachers have very strong and mixed feelings about teaching in combination rooms. The following statements are the major conclusions from this study:

1. All CC teachers should have an aide and a pay bonus to teach a CC. Schools should make having a CC a privilege.
2. Colleges and school districts have not provided special training on how to teach a CC.
3. The majority of teachers do not prefer to teach CCs.
4. Students do as well academically and socially in a CC.

5. Younger students do as well academically and socially in a CC as they do in a regular classroom.

6. CC might be harmful to a student if they have a CC year after year.

7. Teachers feel strongly about classroom size. They prefer small CCs to large regular classes.

8. Parents do not like CCs for their children but the students do not seem to mind if they are in one.

9. Teachers who like to teach CCs integrate instruction and mix the grade levels for instruction.